

FOUNDERS OF OUR LIVING FAITHS

# ZARATHUSHTRA

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
AND TRAINING

*December, 1968*

*Fausa 1890*

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and Training, 1968*

**Re. 0·80**

**PUBLISHED AT THE PUBLICATION UNIT BY SHRI P. N. NATU,  
SECRETARY, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
AND TRAINING, 9, EASTERN AVENUE, MAHARANI BAGH,  
NEW DELHI-14 AND PRINTED BY SRI B. D. SEN AT NABA  
MUDRAN PRIVATE LIMITED, 170-A, ACHARYA PRAFULLA  
CHANDRA ROAD, CALCUTTA-4.**

# FOREWORD

**I**T is well-known that there is a dearth of suitable supplementary reading material for our school-going children, although the need for it is widely recognized. To fulfil this need, the National Council of Educational Research and Training has a scheme to publish literature suited to the needs and comprehension of children of the age-group 14-17 years. This is a new venture of the Council and a part of it is devoted to the publication of small brochures on our heritage.

The intention is to bring alive to the minds of the children of this age-group the significant characteristics and values of an ancient Civilization and at the same time, to enable them to understand the underlying features of the various religions that are living forces in India today. An attempt has been made to present the material in such a way as to evoke in the reader a lively appreciation of the many-sided facets of our mosaic culture.

This brochure which is one of a series entitled "Founders of Our Living Faiths" sets out in a brief and compact form the life and teachings of "Zarathushtra". We hope that this booklet will reach as many school children as possible and be well received by all the educational institutions in the country. We would consider ourselves adequately rewarded if this brochure and the others to be published in the same series make the desired impact on the minds of our young readers.

**PREM KIRPAL**

*Director, National Council of  
Educational Research and Training*



*Overleaf: Bust line-sketch of Zarathushtra.*



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**A**CCORDING to tradition, the seven regions of the earth were divided as follows : first came the countries of the rising sun to the extreme East, and the countries of the setting sun to the extreme West, each separated by a mountain range, then two countries to the extreme North, two countries to the extreme South, and in the centre of all these Airyana Vaeja, the "land of the Aryans."

The original home of the Aryans is said to be somewhere in the northern steppe lands of Turkestan. According to one of the sacred texts, the *Vendidad*,<sup>1</sup> Gaya Maretan, the first man, was born here, and from him all the ancient Iranians claim their descent.

## The Home of the Aryans

Now Zarathushtra's name for God is Ahura Mazda, which means Lord of Life and Wisdom. In the *Vendidad* we read that the

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first of the lands created by Ahura Mazda was Airyana Vaeja, the home of the Aryans. The ancient name for Iran, the birth place of the prophet, Zarathushtra, was Airyana Vaeja, the seed or seat of the Aryans. It was here that Ahura Mazda summoned a joint conference of the heavenly angels and the best of men under the leadership of Yima (modern Jamshed) Kshaeta, the Good Shepherd, to whom the Kingly Glory (Khorenah) of Ahura Mazda clung. Under Yima's long reign all things prospered. Flocks and herds and men increased so greatly that Airyana Vaeja could no longer contain them. Thrice the illustrious Yima led his people southward "on the way of the sun." After many such migrations, the Aryans finally established themselves in Iran probably by 2000 B.C.

### **Iran's First King**

According to Pishdadian legend, Haoshyangha (modern Hoshang) was the first king of primitive Iran. He is said to be the Iranian Prometheus who discovered fire and taught his people the use of it. One day he encountered a monster, and hurled a



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huge stone at it. But the stone hit a rock when sparks of fire emerged. He was also the first to bring iron into use and taught the people to make instruments from it. Although a great warrior who fought successfully against thieving border tribes, Haoshyangha is also described as having constructed canals and irrigation works. No wonder it is said that in his reign "the plants and the waters laughed."

### The Art of Writing

His successor, Takhma Urupi (modern Tehmurasp), was named "demon-binder", as he was even more successful than Haoshyangha in subduing the hostile, non-Aryan tribes. These tribes were nick-named "demons." When Takhma Urupi had subjugated the "demons", he extracted from them, according to tradition, the knowledge of no less than thirty languages, six of which are mentioned by name by the great Persian historian of the Middle Ages, Firdausi, in his *Shah-nama*, or Epic of the Kings.<sup>3</sup> They are Roman (Latin), Arabic, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Pahlevi.<sup>3</sup> Besides introducing the Aryans to a well-defined script, Takhma

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Urupi is also said to be the first to establish the art of weaving.

Yima, son of Vivanghvant, was the third great Pishdadian king, and succeeded Takhma Urupi. It was Yima who divided the tribes into the four great divisions of priest, warrior, artisan and labourer. He constructed roads and made ships to cross the oceans. In his reign, gold, silver, rubies and other precious stones were dug and used for ornaments by the women. Yima's throne was said to be studded with sparkling gems, and became known as the wonder of the world. He discovered sugarcane, and taught the people to make sugar from its juice. Wine was also made for the first time in his reign, and served in goblets by cup-bearers at his court. Later tradition affirms that Yima was the first to discover the art of medicine.

### **Downfall of an Empire**

But Yima grew proud and abandoned the truth. Then the Kingly Glory of Ahura Mazda "was seen to flee away from him in the shape of a bird. When his Glory had disappeared, the great Yima Kshaeta, the

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Good Shepherd, trembled and was in sorrow before his foes ; he was confounded and laid him down on the ground." He who had freed the plants and the waters from drought, who had brought immortality to man and beast, saw his people and all creatures perish "from plain and hillside."

### **The Kingly Glory**

It was probably about this time that the Semitic prince, Azhi Dahaka, also known as Zohak, conquered the Iranians and ruled over them for many years. He was notorious for his cruelty, but at last, Thraetaona (modern Faridoon), of the clan Athwya, rose up and overthrew Azhi Dahaka and freed the Iranians from his rule. The Kingly Glory, lost by Yima, was restored to the Iranians.

King Thraetaona was a wise and virtuous monarch. He had three sons : Selm, Tur and Erij (modern Irach or Erach). The mother of Selm and Tur was a daughter of Zohak, but the mother of Erij was an Iranian princess. The three brothers were married to the three daughters of a king

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of Arabia. After this event, King Thraetaona decided to divide his vast empire during his life time between his three sons. To Selm, he gave the kingdom of the Semites to the West (modern Turkey) ; to Tur he gave the country of the Turanians (modern Tartary and part of China) ; and to Erij he gave Iran. But the two elder brothers were not content with their portions of the empire and demanded Iran as well. Erij went to make peace between his brothers but was murdered for his pains. His grandson, Meenuchecher, eventually overthrew Selm and Tur, slaying them in battle. Thus, at last, the Iranians were victorious and established their sovereignty over the non-Aryan tribes, though frequent clashes continued with the Turanians till the close of the Pishdadian Dynasty, that is, about 2000 B.C.

It was at this stage, some time between 2000 B.C. and 1500 B.C., that the Aryans split into two major groups. One group stayed on in Iran and established themselves finally in Bactria in eastern Iran. The second group migrated southeastward, in successive waves, till they had climbed the huge barriers of the Hindukush

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Mountains and descended into the fertile plains of India. The sacred books of the ancient Iranians and the Vedic Indians contain common references to rivers and other geographical areas which point to Afghanistan as being the last country where the Aryan tribes were together.

### The Writings of Zarathushtra

We now come to the era of Zarathushtra. Nobody knows the date of Zarathushtra's birth. All we have of his writings are the five *Gathas*, or Divine Songs. The *Gathas* resemble the earliest portions of the *Rig Veda*. Like the *Vedas*, the Gathic verses were chanted for many hundreds of years and written down only much later. The archaic form of the language, however, has been preserved to this day.

We do not even know the name of the language in which the *Gathas* are written. Yet, Gathic Avestan, as the language is loosely termed, and Rig Vedic Sanskrit are both descended from a common language which is now lost. Hence, the late Dr. Irach Taraporevala was able to rewrite a Gathic verse into Rig Vedic Sanskrit

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with only slight changes. He has also shown the remarkable resemblance between the metre of the first Gatha, the *Ahunavaiti*, with the Gayatri metre used in the *Vedas*.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars still do not agree on the question as to when Zarathushtra lived. Western scholars believe he lived around 600 B.C. Indian and Iranian scholars, by comparing the *Gathas* with the earliest portions of the *Rig Veda*, and on the basis of other evidence, place Zarathushtra's birth around 6000 B.C. or earlier.

The *Gathas*, however, tell us very little about the life of Zarathushtra. They are beautiful poems containing Zarathushtra's ideas on the creation of the world and man; the origin of evil; the nature of Ahura Mazda and His Powers; and lastly, how man is to attain union with Ahura Mazda while still in this world.

### The Legendary Account

There is, however, a legendary account of Zarathushtra's life found in the *Pahlavi Texts*, written several hundred years

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after Zarathushtra's death. Let us now turn to this legendary life of the Prophet.

Many centuries ago, in the ancient city of Rai, modern Ragha, in Media, in the northwest of Iran, there lived a good and kind man named Frahim-rava. He had a beautiful daughter named Dughdova. When she was fifteen years old, her whole body shone with a brilliant light. Wherever she moved, this light went with her. All who saw her were amazed, and some were afraid, wondering if she was bewitched. Her father, therefore, sent her away to Arak in Azarbaijan. Here Paitirasp befriended her and married her to his son, Paorushaspa.

### **The Child Zarathushtra**

Now Arak was a fine city, ringed with high mountains, and with the river of the same name flowing through it. To this day, the Arak rises in the Caucasus Mountains, wanders through Armenia and Azarbaijan and empties its waters into the Caspian Sea. In this beautiful city, on a fine Spring morning, Zarathushtra was born. Hence, the Iranians celebrated, and still

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celebrate, their New Year, on the 21st of March, the Spring Equinox, while the Prophet's birthday was celebrated five days after the New Year. It is still celebrated on the same day by the Parsis of India. It was termed Khordad Sal, the Year of Perfection.

Many miracles are recorded in the life of Zarathushtra. It is said of him that he laughed when he was born, whereas all other children cry at birth. Pliny, the Greek historian, states that the vibrations from the child's brain were so powerful that no hand could touch him there.

### **Attempts on His Life**

At that time there lived a wicked magician called Dorasarun. He and his men attempted several times to kill the child. Once, they stole the baby Zarathushtra from his mother and left him at the foot of the high Alburz Mountains. A mother eagle found the babe and carried him to her eyrie and fed him with her young ones till his mother Dughdova, weeping and with bleeding feet, found her son and took him home.



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These black magicians again tried to destroy the babe. They threw him in a ravine where a herd of cattle used to charge at sunset in search of water. A sturdy cow stood over the infant Zarathushtra to protect him as the herd thundered past to her left and right.

Again, an attempt was made to kill the young child. He was thrown among a pack of wolves whose young ones had been deliberately murdered. But when the she-wolf and her mate rushed to devour the human babe, their jaws were paralysed. At that moment, two she-goats passed by and took away baby Zarathushtra and fed him with their milk. Later his mother, frantic with anxiety, and with torn clothes and dishevelled hair, found her little son and took him home.

One last attempt was made on the child's life when Dorasarun himself stole into the bed chamber of the sleeping babe and tried to stab him. But, miraculously, his hand was stayed in mid-air, and the javelin fell to the floor.

### **Zarathushtra as a Boy**

Zarathushtra grew up to be a thoughtful and

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kind lad. He was sad to see the misery of the poor. One day, he brought home a starving dog and nursed him back to life. When there was famine in the land, and many were dying, Zarathushtra begged his parents to give away all the food they had. They did so, and the whole family became as poor as those they had fed. But they were happy because they had gained the love of the common people.

At the age of fifteen years, Zarathushtra turned away from all worldly pleasures and devoted himself, night and day, to the worship of God, that is, Ahura Mazda.

When he was twenty years old, he bade farewell to his parents and went to meditate in a cave. Like Gautama, the Buddha, and like Mahavir, the last of the Jain saints, Zarathushtra also wanted to know and understand the mystery of life. Why was there death and suffering in the world? Why were some poor and hungry, and others rich and well-fed? How did evil come into this world? For ten long years he lived alone in a cave, conversing with Ahura Mazda in vision and asking him many deep and searching questions.

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### First Disciple

At the age of thirty, Zarathushtra went back to the world of men and taught them the wisdom he had learnt. His first disciple was his own cousin, Maidhyomaongha. For many years the two men wandered from place to place preaching, but the various tribes, the Bendvas, the Grehmas, the Karapans, the Kevayas and the Ushikhs, would have nothing to do with Zarathushtra's teachings.

At last, Zarathushtra came to the small kingdom of Bactria in eastern Iran. The ruling king at the time was Vishtaspa, and his queen was named Hutaosha. Their son was Prince Asfandyar, and their two most trusted ministers of state were Frashaoshtra and Jamaspa, brothers belonging to the clan of the Havogvas.

After performing many miracles, and after expounding his teachings, Zarathushtra was able to convert the entire court of King Vishtaspa and the common people. He is said to have married Havovi, the daughter of Frashaoshtra, and had by her three sons and three daughters.

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### Accepted as a Prophet

It was about this time, when he had been accepted and honoured as a prophet, that the title of Zarathushtra was given to him. The word, Zarathushtra, is made up of "zarath" meaning russet coloured or red-gold; and "ushtra" meaning shining, from the root "vas" or "ush" to shine. Hence, Zarathushtra means "He of the red-gold . light." Western scholars derive the word "ushtra" from a different root, and so translate the word, Zarathushtra, as "Owner of russet camels." From his father's side Zarathushtra's family name was Spitama. From his mother's side, he was descended from the Havogvas. In the sacred writings he is often spoken of as Spitman Zarathushtra, or referred to as Zarathushtra the Spitamid, signifying that Zarathushtra was a member of the Spitama clan.

The Prophet was forty-two years old at this time. Although he had married the daughter of a minister at the court of Vishtaspa, he did not lapse into a life of luxury and ease. For the next thirty years he travelled from place to place, on foot, on horseback, by camel and yak,

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spreading the new faith. He is said to have gone as far afield as India and China in his religious mission.

### **Stabbed to Death**

According to tradition, Zarathushtra's death was sudden and tragic. When he was seventy-seven years old, he was praying in a Fire Temple<sup>6</sup> at Balkh when the hostile tribe of Turanians entered Balkh. Their leader, Tur-bara-Tur, sought out the Prophet and stabbed him in the back as he was lost in prayer. Later tradition adds the picturesque detail that, before he died, Zarathushtra threw his prayer beads over the murderer saying, "May Ahura forgive you even as I do." That very instant, the assassin also fell dead.

### **The Social Conditions**

Let us now turn to the social conditions which prevailed in Zarathushtra's day. It is probable that the Prophet was born among the cattle breeding peasants of western Iran. They were farmers and nomads. Their settlements were known

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as "gaetha", and their most precious possession was their cattle. Hence, Geush Urva, the Soul of the Cattle, or Ox-Soul, was a symbol for the Soul of Creation.

This Aryan image is also found in the *Srimad Bhavata Purana* (X.1, verse 17-18), wherein Mother Earth, "wearing the shape of cow", and with tears streaming down her face, goes before Indra, the Chief of the Gods, and complains that she is oppressed by wicked men. In answer to her prayer for a deliverer, Lord Krishna is born.

Similarly, Geush Urva, the Soul of Creation, goes before Ahura Mazda and complains bitterly that she is oppressed by Scorn, Anger, Robbery, Aggression and Violence. She begs for a deliverer, "a Master in Righteousness and a benefactor of the Good Mind." In answer to her appeal, Zarathushtra is born.

Society in Zarathushtra's day was divided into the following :

Demana or Nemana.....the Home  
Vis.....the Town  
Shoithra or Zantu.....the State  
Daxhyu.....the Country.

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Each of these divisions had its *pati* or overlord.

Money was not known, but a system of barter prevailed. A fine carpet, or a coat of camel hair, would be exchanged for a cow or a horse. In the dark, cold, winter months, the farmers moved their settlements to those areas where they could find grass for their animals.

The shepherds in the mountain fastnesses were not as peaceful as the farmers. When food grew scarce, they raided the settlements at the foot of the hills, slaughtered all the men folk, and carried away the women and children, together with the cattle, horses and camels. The women and children were made to work as slaves, while the cattle provided the necessary food during the lean winter months.

### **Religious Beliefs**

There was no one religion in which the people believed. Many gods were worshipped. There were tree gods and river gods, gods of the sky and gods of the underworld. Some showered blessings on

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man, others were believed to bring drought and famine, disease and death. When any great calamity occurred, such as a famine, the tribesmen, out of fear, would slaughter some 500 heads of cattle to please the angry gods.

In this environment of many gods and goddesses to whom bloody scarifices were made, Zarathushtra lived and worked. His age was an age of violence. One tribe was warring against another, one overlord against another. Famines were frequent, and suffering was widespread. Zarathushtra was in strong opposition to the spirit of his age. Like Buddha who was to come after him, he was against all blood sacrifice and the senseless killing of men and animals. During the ten long years that he had meditated alone in a cave, and conversed with Ahura Mazda, Lord of Life and Wisdom, in vision, and held Him "in his very eyes", he had realised that there was only one God, Ahura Mazda, who is to be "grasped in purest essence and in vision " (*Yasna* 33.7). All other gods and goddesses did not exist for Zarathushtra. He implored the tribesmen to stop killing one another and slaughtering their cattle, and to worship only one God,



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Ahura Mazda, who longs for all men to come to Him of their own free will. Black magicians and sorcerers were also very powerful in Zarathushtra's time, and they were leading men astray. Wherever he turned, he saw evil and suffering.

### Origin of Evil

Every prophet, however, has to explain the problem of evil and suffering in this world. Each comes to the conclusion that evil and suffering pass away, but Truth and Goodness remain. They can never be destroyed, for they are eternal. In them alone, man finds his joy and fulfilment.

Zarathushtra's explanation of the origin of evil is different from that found in any other religion. He puts his explanation in the form of the story, or parable, of the Twin Spirits, or Twin Mainyu as they are named in the *Gathas*.

According to Zarathushtra, the Twin Spirits represent the two aspects of the human mind, which he describes as the "better" and the "bad". From the very beginning, the Better Mind addressed its twin, the

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Evil Mind, saying : "Neither in thought, word, or deed are we one." When man chooses to exercise his Better Mind, he creates "gaya" or life. When he exercises his Evil Mind he is in a state called "ajyaiti" or the absence of life, that is, death.

Mankind was asked to choose between these two Spirits. Those who loved Ahura Mazda and gladdened Him with their sincere and devoted actions, exercised their Better Mind and so were able to choose Asha, the Truth of God, His Divine Law and Order, His Righteousness and Justice. But those who chose to exercise their Evil Mind, found themselves in a state of dark confusion and so rushed towards Aeshma, Demon of Wrath and Bloodthirstiness, through whom they poisoned the whole of human life.

The world was thus divided into two opposing groups : the Ashavants, or Followers of Truth ; and the Dregvants, or Followers of the Lie, the Druj, described in the later writings as a foul, stinking hag, a witch. According to Zarathushtra, these two types of men will continue to the end of human existence, and they will

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always be in opposition to each other,  
the Lie wanting to devour the Truth,  
and the Truth for ever overpowering the Lie.

When evil thus entered the world, and  
the whole of human life was poisoned,  
Ahura Mazda sent to His true believers,  
His four great Powers who surround the  
good man throughout his life on earth and  
help him to choose the right and act  
accordingly. These four Powers are :

Asha.....the Divine Law.  
Vohu Mana.....the Good Mind,  
God's all-embracing love,  
Xshathra.....God's Might and Majesty,  
His Sovereignty,  
Aramaiti.....Divine Devotion,  
the "joy-giver."

Surrounded by these four Powers, the  
good man "walks hand in hand with Asha,"  
*Ashat hachit Asha*, to quote Zarathushtra's  
own words (*Yasna*, 34. 2).

Among the Dregvants, the Followers of  
the Lie, Zarathushtra places "evil rulers,  
evil doers, evil speakers, those of evil  
conscience and evil thinkers", (*Yasna*,  
49.11). The wicked, however, are not  
deserted by Ahura Mazda, for when they

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taste the bitter flavour of their own thoughts and acts, then Xshathra, the Sovereignty of God, is revealed to them through Vohu Mana, God's all-embracing Love.

### Evil Is Destroyed

It is said that, in order to explain how evil is to be destroyed, Zarathushtra preached, holding a ball of fire in one hand, and a shepherd's crook, with a bull's head surmounting it, in the other. Just as fire destroys all filth, itself remaining pure, even so, the Fire of Thought in man must burn up all the evil in his heart and mind. Hence, Atar, or Atash as it is now called, is held sacred by all Zoroastrians and burns in their Atash Behrams or Fire Temples day and night, being fed by the priests with sandal wood and incense.

In the *Gathas*, Zarathushtra links together Atar and Manas, Fire and Mind, to make man realize that Atar is not just a physical fire, but an emble of the Fire of Thought (*Yasna*, 46.7). It is Atar who discovers the hidden evil in a flash,

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and destroys it "with a turn of the hand" (*Yasna*, 34.4). Again, it is Atar, the discerning intellect in man, which enables him to distinguish the Follower of Truth from the Follower of the Lie (*Yasna*, 43.4).

We may now ask, why did Ahura Mazda allow even the inclination for evil in so frail a creature as man? Zarathushtra's answer is that if all men were good by nature, there would be no choice. God would be adored automatically and Zarathushtra's insistence that man should turn to God of his own free will would be meaningless. If Ahura Mazda wants all His creatures to come to Him in love and of their own accord, then He must permit them the liberty of ignoring and denying His existence. In short, He must give them the choice to come to Him or not as they wish.

### **Bridge of Choice**

Hence, Zarathushtra affirms that man is constantly walking over the Bridge Chinvat. This is described by the Prophet as Chinvato-pérétu, the Bridge of Choice, or the Bridge of the Separator, that is,

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separating the Follower of the Truth from the Follower of the Lie. According to Zarathushtra, man is for ever faced with a choice. With every decision he makes, he walks over the Bridge Chinvat. Even the Soul of Creation, Geush Urva, is given "the choice of a way, either to abide with the good shepherd, the deliverer, or with him who never was one" (*Yasna*, 31.9). So she "chose for herself, as shepherd and guardian, a master in righteousness and a benefactor of the Good Mind," (*Yasna*, 31.10), none other than Zarathushtra.

When both Man and Nature turn to Ahura Mazda of their own free will, then comes the Frasho-kéréti, the Renewal of Existence. This renewal will occur "at the last turning point in life" when Ahura Mazda and His Powers will come to judge the living and the dead, (*Yasna*, 43.6).

Zarathushtra's teachings may now be summarized. In the first place, he insists that there is only one God, Ahura Mazda, a God of Spirit and Truth, who desires all His creatures to come to Him of their own free will. Secondly,

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Zarathushtra asserts that man is faced with the choice either to walk hand in hand with Asha, the Truth of God, or follow the Druj, the Lie. Thirdly, the Prophet says that Evil is to be destroyed by Atar, the Fire of Thought, or else be delivered "into the two hands of Asha" to be transformed into the Truth.

### **Zarathushtra's Motto**

Lastly, the Prophet chooses as his motto, the three words : Humata, Hukta, Huvarashta (Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds).

In the *Pahlavi Texts*, the relationship between these three is beautifully described. Good Thoughts, it is said, dwell in the starlit heavens. If they are not spoken and acted upon, are as remote and feeble as the light of the distant stars.

Good Words dwell in the moon-lit heavens, unless they are transformed into good deeds, are as weak and changeable as the light of the moon.

Good Deeds, on the other hand, live in

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the "Mansions of the Sun", and they shine with their own lustre and do not need anyone to proclaim their existence.

Zarathushtra places a great deal of emphasis on active good deeds. Man must gain strength from Ahura Mazda and His Powers, and then go out into the world to fight evil and establish the Sovereignty of God on earth.

### **Circle of Contemplative Thought**

To achieve this aim, Zarathushtra established the Circle of Contemplative Thought among his followers. In this circle men and women gathered together and communed with Ahura Mazda and His Powers by singing ecstatic songs in His praise. By this communion, the exhausted disciples would fill themselves with spiritual strength and return to the world to fight evil and help the poor and the downtrodden to overcome oppression.

These Divine Powers with whom Zarathushtra and his disciples communed, are aspects of Ahura Mazda. In the later writings they are named the Amesha Spenta, the Immortal Shining Ones.



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Next come the four Powers who are the constant companions of the good man in his journey through life. They are : Asha, the Divine Law ; Vohu Mana, the Good Mind ; Xshathra, Ahura Mazda's Might and Majesty ; and Aramaiti, Divine Devotion.

To attain a spiritual life on earth, man must first exercise Atar, his Fire of Thought, and awaken Manas, his Pure Mind. Man now draws to himself Chisti, that ray of Light which is the beginning of Divine Illumination. Chisti brings with her Khratu, that knowledge which is rooted in wisdom. Man is now ready, through Sraosha, Divine Intuition, to hear the voice of God, and through Daena, his Visionary Perception, to see Him. In the *Gathas*, Zarathushtra describes himself as the Manthranoduta, the Preacher of the Manthra, the Holy Word of God (*Yasna*, 50.5). It is this Holy Word which is embodied in the Sengha, the Divine Teachings, with which Zarathushtra said he was inspired.

### **The Emblems**

Besides asking his followers to commune

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with Ahura Mazda and His Powers, and act according to the Manthra, the Holy Word, Zarathushtra also made his followers wear the Sudra (a white shirt) and Kusti (a finely woven slender girdle of sheep's wool). Like Atar, Fire, the Sudra and Kusti became the emblems of the Zoroastrian religion.

Every night, before going to bed, the devout Zoroastrian says his prayers. Holding the pocket of his shirt in his left hand, and raising his right hand to his forehead, he bows to Ahura Mazda, offering Him those "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" which he has tried to perform during the day. This little pocket is meant to keep the believer humble, for, however, saintly he may consider himself, as against God's boundless goodness man's good deeds can measure only one square inch.

The Kusti is a finely woven, slender girdle of sheep's wool, made of 72 threads symbolising the 72 chapters of the *Yasna*, or Book of Worship, which contain the five *Gathas*. Hence, the Kusti symbolises the teachings of Zarathushtra. The Kusti is wound thrice round the waist, over

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the Sudra, and tied with two knots in front and one at the back.

The Sudra and Kusti are only taken off at the time of bathing, and never leave the body of the Zoroastrian. Even after death, the corpse is wrapped in clean, white strips of old, torn Sudras before it is taken to the Towers of Silence.

As Zarathushtra laid special emphasis on freedom of choice, the child born of Zoroastrian parents is not considered a Zoroastrian. He must choose his faith. But first, he must learn the special Kusti prayers and understand their meaning, and the significance of the Kusti ritual.

### **The Navjote Ceremony**

Then follows the ceremony called the Navjote. It is only after this ceremony that the boy or girl is considered a true Zoroastrian.

The most dramatic moment in the Kusti ritual comes, however, when the child ties the first knot of the Kusti on the word, "Kshaothenanam", which means "in action." This word occurs in the

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Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayer, considered by all Zoroastrians as the oldest and most sacred. The child recites this brief prayer twice, and twice, on the word, "Kshaothernanam", he ties a knot.

He is promising Ahura Mazda that he will dedicate every single action of his life to Him, and, by cherishing and serving the poor and the downtrodden, establish the Sovereignty of Ahura on earth.

After the last knot of the Kusti is tied at the back with the recitation of the Ashem Vohu prayer, the child repeats the Frávarane, the Zoroastrian Confession of Faith.

Once the Navjote ceremony has been performed, the Zoroastrian child is made to realise, by his parents and the priest, that from henceforth he must learn to be a fully responsible person. He must walk on the Bridge Chinvat, and distinguish the Truth from the Untruth, and having done so, he must firmly clasp the Truth, wherever it may lead him, and whatever misfortune or unhappiness it may bring him. He must be prepared to die for the Truth.

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The Zoroastrians believe it is easy to discern the Truth, for in each man there resides the Fravashi, or pure spark of God which can never be destroyed or made evil. Even the most wicked person has his Fravashi which hovers over his head and entreats him, night and day, to give up his wicked habits. Moreover, Atar, the Flaming Fire of Thought, in every individual searches out and destroys the hidden evil in a flash, "with a turn of the hand," to quote Zarathushtra. Hence, every true believer is able to see the Truth, with the help of the Divine Powers and his Fravashi, and to follow it because he is filled with the strength bestowed upon him by Ahura Mazda.

### **The Muktaḍ Ceremony**

Every year, the Fravashis of the Righteous are invoked and honoured during the Muktaḍ ceremonies which take place for ten days before the Zoroastrian New Year. During the last five days, the five *Gathas* are recited, one on each day, the Fravashi of Zarathushtra specially honoured.

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The word, Muktaḍ, is derived from the Persian word, Mukhtar, meaning supreme or highest choice. During these ten days, in every Fire Temple, and in every Zoroastrian home, special prayers are chanted, throughout the day till the evening.

Members of the family, from the oldest to the youngest, gather in the prayer room. Those old enough to know the long prayers, say them from their prayer books, or chant in unison with the priest.

Those who are too poor to afford a special priest to come to their homes and pray, or who cannot afford to buy silver vases or fresh flowers every day, go to the Fire Temples where the same prayers are being recited for the Righteous Dead.

On the tenth day, New Year's Eve, the Fravashis of the Righteous are believed to bless the homes in which they have been remembered. They then return to Ahura Mazda who dwells in the Realms of Boundless Light.

On Navroze, or New Year's Day, everyone dresses up in fine, new clothes, and goes to the Fire Temple to pray. The rest of the day is spent in visiting friends

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and relations, exchanging gifts, and in partaking of specially prepared food.

The Fravashis are also believed to 'come to earth at the death of any righteous person. In the *Pahlavi Texts* it is written that when a good man is dying, the Fravashis of the Righteous in their thousands and tens of thousands, descend to earth in "points of light" and surround the dying man's head "like a golden cloud."

For four days after death, the soul of the dead person is believed to hover near the home, reluctant to leave her familiar surroundings and unhappy at watching the grief of her dear ones. During this period, the Fravashis of the Righteous guard the young soul who is compared in her spiritual knowledge to an infant at birth. By the fourth day, the soul is said to have grown like to a young man of twenty-one years. It is on this day that the soul severs her connection with the world and goes to her eternal rest.

In the *Pahlavi Texts* it is written that when the soul of the righteous man leaves the world, she comes to the Bridge

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Chinvat where she meets a dazzlingly beautiful maiden.

“Who are you ?” asks the wondering soul.

“Do you not recognize me ?” is the reply.

The soul shakes her head.

“I am the good deeds you performed on earth,” answers the maiden.

She then takes the soul by the hand, as it were, and leads her to Ahura Mazda, to Garo Demana, the House of Heavenly Song, in the Realms of Boundless Light.

### **The Reward of Eternal Life**

According to Zarathushtra, it is only after a long life on earth spent in fighting evil that the soul earns the twin rewards of spiritual life, Haurvatat, Perfection, and Ameretatat, Immortality. They are described in the *Gathas* as twins, “two mighty promoters of Righteousness (Asha)” who dwell united in the glorious light of Mazda’s Wisdom (*Yasna*, 33.9).

These powers resemble the Asvins, the twin horsemen of the *Vedas*. The Asvins also dwell in dazzling light, and teach men “Madhyu-vidya” the honey-sweet knowledge



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of divinity, whereby "old men grow young again, and blind men see."

Zarathushtra is one of the humblest of the great religious founders. He considers himself to be the first of a long line of prophets and seers who were yet to be born. He, therefore, blesses the Saoshyants, the Future Saviours of Mankind, who, he says, are destined to be "the smiters of Wrath." In the last *Gatha*, which celebrates the marriage of his youngest daughter, Paoruchista, he exhorts those present to love one another through Asha, the Divine Law. He appeals to them to disassociate themselves from the worship of the Druj, the Lie, and to cast away all deceptions, so that, one day soon, man may become "the mightiest conquerer of death" (*Yasna*, 53, 5, 6, 8).

Zarathushtra, therefore, appeals to every human being to play his part in this great cosmic drama of the conquest of death and evil by Life and Truth. He wants every individual to challenge each thought and act, and having done so, to choose the Right and abide by it, for Zarathushtra would have all men walk "in the green pastures of the Divine Law and the Good Mind" (*Yasna*, 33.3).

# NOTES

1. The Zoroastrian scriptures are collectively known as the *Avesta* of which the *Gathas*, or Divine Songs, composed by Zarathushtra, are the oldest and most sacred portion. The word, "Avesta" means "pillar" or "foundation." The *Avesta* consists of long compilations such as the *Yasna*, or Book of Worship, which contains the *Gathas*; the *Visperad* and the *Vendidad*. The *Avesta* also comprises shorter prayers like the *Nyaeshes* and the *Yashts*. A vast literature once existed under the title of the *Avesta*. Today, only a fragment survives. The earliest portions of the *Avesta* were composed long before the reign of Darius (521-485 B.C.); the later portions in the succeeding centuries. The *Pahlavi Texts* were composed and written under the Sasanians (226-651 A.D.) and later. After the conquest of Iran by Alexander in 480 B.C., tradition asserts that much of the *Avesta* was destroyed or scattered. In the first century A.D., the Parthian, Valkhash (Vologoses I), is said to have made an attempt to gather together the various scattered portions of the *Avesta*. As far as we know, the redactions of these texts were made under the Sasanians, and completed, in their present form, possibly in the sixth century A.D. The phrase, *Zend-Avesta*, is a misnomer, for "Zend" means "commentary", and so the phrase should read, *Avesta-e-Zend*, the *Avesta* and Its Commentary.

The Parsis of India, who are the only living followers of Zarathushtra today, numbering a little over 100,000, apart from a small community in Iran, came to India as refugees around 651 A.D., and landed near Sanjana

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in Gujerat. The Hindu Ranas of the day, especially Jadhav Rana, were good to these refugees and granted them freedom of worship and gave them land to cultivate. About 1200 A.D., a Parsi priest, Neryosangh Dhaval, translated the entire extant *Avesta* into Sanskrit, probably because of the interest shown in the religion by the Hindu scholars of the time. In the late 19th century, Ervad Edulji Kanga, another Parsi priest translated the entire extant *Avesta* into Gujerati, still the most popular translation among the Parsis who say their ancient prayers in Gujerati transliteration. Today, the Vedic Research Institute at Poona has a small band of Hindu and Zoroastrian scholars who are editing, transliterating, and translating the entire *Avesta* into Hindi.

2. The real name of Firdausi was Abul Kasim Mansur or Hasan (c. 941-1020 A.D.). He is the great epic poet of Iran. His *Shah-nama* or Book of Kings, contains 60,000 rhyming couplets which tell the story of the Iranian kings, both legendary and historical, from the earliest times to the Islamic conquest of Iran by the Arabs.

3. According to the archaeologist, R. Ghirshman, during the last centuries "before 3000 B.C." the Iranians at Susa, in southern Iran, created their own writing known as "Proto-Elamite." From this pictographic script, influenced by Mesopotamia, there developed the cuneiform script, the earliest example of which is the golden tablet of Ariamnes. Side by side with the cuneiform script, Aramaic was widely used since "the beginning of the first millenium B.C.". Under the Achaemenians (558 B.C.—330 B.C.), Aramaic became "a true *lingua franca* in Asia" and the cuneiform script was used chiefly for

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stone inscriptions. Under the Parthian Arsacids (330 B.C.—225 A.D.), the Pahlavi Arsacid script developed, the first example of which is found on the coinage of Vologoses I, (Iranian Valkhash), under whose reign an attempt was made to collect the scattered portions of the *Avesta*. The Pahlavi-Arsacid script developed into the Pahlavi-Sasanian script, a clear example of which is found on the columns of the votive monument set up in the centre of Bishapur, identified by the inscription as part of a statue of Shapur I. Pahlavi was superseded by Pazand and Farsi from which developed modern Persian. (See R. Ghirshman, *Iran*, (Pelican Book), London, 1954, p. 45, fig. 16; p. 120, fig. 48; p. 257, fig. 78; p. 321, fig. 89. See also M. N. Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Civilization*, New York, 1922, chaps. VII, XXXI, XLIII.)

4. *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 293-295; Vol. XVIII, pp. 127-128.

5. Irach J. S. Taraporewala, "Gathe Metre and Chanting", paper presented at the Eleventh All India Oriental Conference, December 1941, and printed in the *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, Vol. III, pp. 219-224.

6. Even before Zarathushtra's day, the cult of Fire existed in Iran. Mention is made in the *Gathas* of the Usikhs, (Vedic Usigs), who sacrificed only to the god of Fire like the Vedic Usigs, a family of priests who are believed to have started the cult of Agni (fire) in India. Among the Parsis today, Fire Temples are divided into three categories: Atash Behram, or Fire of Victory, considered the highest; Atash Adran or Atash Kadeh or Agyari, which is the consecrated Fire in a

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smaller temple than the Atash Behram; and lastly, there is the Atash Dadgah, the household Fire, tended daily by every Zoroastrian in his home. Other sacred fires mentioned in the *Avesta* are: Nairyosangha (Vedic Narashamsa), the sacred Fire which acted as a messenger between Ahura Mazda and His creatures on earth. Hence, it was considered a royal fire, "seated in the hearts of kings." The fire named Burzin Meher was particularly associated with King Vishtaspa of Bactria who befriended Zarathushtra. The fire, Khordad, or the Fire of Perfection, was associated with the Prophet himself; while the fire, Minokirk, or Fire of the Other World, was believed to be part of the light surrounding Ahura Mazda. In India today, there are eight Atash Behrams; four in Bombay, two in Surat, one in Navsari, and one in Udvada. This last is the oldest and considered the holiest by the Parsis as the fire there has been burning for nearly one thousand years, being consecrated soon after the first Iranian refugees landed at Sanjana around 651 A.D. The sacred Fire at the Atash Behram at Udvada is named Iranshah, the Royal Iranian Fire, in memory of the Kingly Glory of ancient Iran. (See Irach J. S. Taraporewala, *Zoroastrian Daily Prayers*, 3rd ed. Bombay, 1959, p. 237-238; and M. N. Dhalla, *History of Zoroastrianism*, New York, 1938, reprint, 1963, pp. 221-225).

7. The technical term for Towers of Silence is "dakhma". The English phrase was coined by Robert Xavier Murphy, some time English translator to the Government of Bombay in the late 19th century. As the three elements, earth, fire and water, were held sacred by the Achaemenians, the corpse could neither be buried, burnt or immersed. Dead bodies were, there-

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fore, exposed on mountains or on towers specially built for this purpose in ancient Iran. The dried bones were then placed in ossuaries or deposited in tombs, either built or cut in the rock. (See R. Ghirshman, *Iran*, London, 1954, p. 162). The Parsi dakhmas are also built on high ground. The Tower is a massive structure built of solid stone, and about 300 feet in circumference. Steps from the ground lead to an iron gate which opens on a circular platform of stone with a well in the centre. The platform is paved with large stone slabs divided into three rows of shallow, open receptacles. The first row is for male corpses, the second for female, and the third for children. The dead body is carried on an iron bier up to one of these rows. The white wrappings from the body are then removed and cast into a pit, and the naked corpse exposed to vultures who devour the flesh within an hour or two. When the bones of the skeleton are dried completely, they are thrown into the well where they slowly crumble to dust. There are holes in the inner sides of the well through which rain water is carried into four underground drains at the base of the Tower. These drains are connected with four underground wells the bottoms of which are covered with thick layers of sand. Pieces of charcoal and sandstone are also placed at the end of each drain, and these pieces are renewed from time to time. Thus, the rain water passing over the bones is purified before entering the soil, in keeping with the ancient command that the earth shall not be polluted. (See J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, 2nd ed. Bombay, 1937, pp. 65-70 ; 231-238.)

# GLOSSARY

The words are defined in the senses in which they have been used in the book.

<i>afield</i>	away from home, at a distance
<i>archaic</i>	language not now used except for special purposes
<i>artisan</i>	mechanic, handicrafts man
<i>benefactor</i>	a person who gives encouragement and support
<i>commune</i>	communicate intimately with God
<i>contemplative</i>	thoughtful
<i>crook</i>	earthen pot or jar
<i>cuneiform</i>	V-shaped writing in ancient inscriptions of Persia, Assyria, etc.
<i>dazzling</i>	bright, striking, sparking
<i>discerning</i>	having quick and true understanding
<i>ember</i>	small piece of live coal or wood
<i>expound</i>	explain, interpret
<i>extant</i>	still existing (esp. of documents etc.)
<i>eyrie</i>	nest of birds which kill and eat other animals

<i>girdle</i>	belt or cord encircling the waist
<i>lean winter months</i>	period of scarcity
<i>millennium</i>	period of a thousand years
<i>pictograph</i>	picture symbols used in primitive records
<i>righteousness</i>	just, upright, virtuous, law abiding
<i>smiter</i>	one who strikes or hits
<i>stayed</i>	stopped or checked
<i>transliterate</i>	represent words in the more or less corresponding charac- ters of a different language
<i>transpose</i>	render or rewrite in a different metre
<i>vision</i>	appearance of a supernatural being in a dream or trance
<i>votive</i>	done in fulfillment of a vow
<i>wont to</i>	used to, accustomed



